From *Armenian Baghesh/Bitlis and Taron/Mush*,
Volume 2 in the series *Historic Armenian Cities and Provinces*,
edited by Richard G. Hovannisian (Costa Mesa, 2001),
Chapter 8, pp. 147-152.

❀ 8 ❀

Armenian Colophons of Turuberan as Vital Sources of Information

Nona Manoukian

The importance of studying Armenian colophons has been appreciated by some of the most eminent scholars in the discipline of Armenian studies. Among those who set about to publish collections of colophons were Ervand Lalayan, Garegin Zarbhanalian, Ghevond Alishan, Garegin Hovsepian, Hamazasp Oskian, Levon Khachikyan, and Artashes Matevosyan.[1] Colophons, which are appended to manuscripts, provide information about a wide diversity of events occurring in the history of a people. Thus, as the noted scholar Matevosyan puts it, we feel in our hearts "deep gratitude, honor, and respect to the memory of those authors of colophons, known and unknown, who have left us inexhaustible riches, keep-

[1] See the following: Ervand Lalayan, *Tsutsak hayeren dzeragrats Vaspurakani* [Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts of Vaspurakan] (Tiflis: Armenian Ethnographical Society, 1915); Garegin Zarbhanalian, *Matenadarani haykakan targmanutiants nakhniats* [Library of Early Armenian Translations] (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1889); Ghevond Alishan, *Ayrarat, bnashkharh Hayastaniayts* [Ayrarat, Armenian Homeland] (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1890); Garegin Hovsepian, "Davit pilisopay" [David, the Philosopher], *Ararat,* no. 11-12 (1916): 898-911; Hamazasp Oskian (Voskian), "Tsutsak hayeren dzeragrats matenadaranin Mkhitariants i Vienna" [Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts in the Library of the Mekhitarists of Vienna], *Handes Amsorya* 59 (1945): cols. 101-16; Levon S. Khachikyan, ed., *XIV dari hayeren dzeragreri hishatakaranner* [Colophons of 14th Century Armenian Manuscripts] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1950); idem, *XV dari hayeren dzeragreri hishatakaranner* [Colophons of 15th Century Armenian Manuscripts], vol. 1 (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1955); A.S. Matevosyan, ed., *Hayeren dzeragreri hishatakaranner, XIII dar* [Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 13th Century] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1984).

This material is presented solely for non-commercial educational/research purposes.

ing for themselves only the yearning to be remembered."[2]

For the purpose of this discussion, colophon examples have been taken from Armenian manuscripts written in Turuberan from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Turuberan constituted the fourth region of historical Armenia, subdivided into sixteen districts, all of which possessed monastic scribal centers. Out of a pool of about a hundred existing texts, for this period eighteen have been selected for more detailed consideration.

In the thirteenth century, the united Armeno-Georgian forces under the command of the Zakarians freed the northern districts of Turuberan, including Manazkert and Arjesh, from Seljuk control. Subsequently, however, the area was overrun by the Mongols and Turkmen tribal groups. Thereafter, in the sixteenth century, Turuberan was annexed by the Ottoman Empire. Hence, the life of the Armenian inhabitants of the region was often disturbed by fighting and warfare. Yet, to our amazement, a high level of scholarly and cultural activity was maintained. And, as the Armenian historians and colophon writers record, the periods of respite between campaigns allowed the community to regain momentum.

It is impossible to isolate the history of medieval Turuberan from events in Greater Armenia and Cilicia. Over this whole area, it was a period of scattering and regrouping which had profound consequences for social and cultural life. It is interesting to observe the development of certain cultural characteristics in an Armenian community under the administration of a recently-arrived dominant ethnic group whose cultural standards were far less developed. For the Armenians it was necessary to overcome the tendency of their uninvited guests to deprive the indigenous population of the requisite stable conditions of existence. In this connection, the scribe Petros notes in the margin of a ritual book he was copying in 1426:

> It was written in Turuberan, which is Berkri . . . under the rule of Skander Khan, son of Yusuf. This is the third year he has come and taken booty and enslaved our land . . . and we were all compelled to flee for refuge, monastics, . . . householders and their wives . . . we wandered around in an alien country and were

[2] Matevosyan, *XIII dar*, p. 11.

continually turned away as we went from door to door.[3]

Herapet, a copyist at the Monastery of the Holy Apostles (Arakelots) in Mush, provides a vignette of the historian Tovma Metsopetsi in a Bible he copied in 1439. He tells how the scholar had come there in flight with numerous *vardapets* and pupils, together with their books, at the appearance of the "Nation of Archers." He goes on to describe the unheard-of destruction that the monastery suffered at the hands of the Kurdish emir of Mush and a renegade named Vardan.[4]

The Armenians who remained in the region were able to survive there in part by focusing on their communal values, as other Armenian communities had successfully done elsewhere. Despite their often arduous conditions of life, Armenian writers, artists, and copyists rose to the challenge of advancing their ethnic and religious culture. Under such conditions Armenians spared no effort to preserve their national riches or free them from foreign seizure. The fate of the *Homilarium* of Mush is well known. Davit Mshetsi, writing in 1408 at Surb Karapet Monastery, gives another case of the same kind:

> I, the humble priest Davit Mshetsi [wrote this] at a bitter time when the Muslims were oppressing the Christian nations and especially the famous Monastery of Surb Karapet of Taron. . . . I paid 200 drams for it out of my legitimate earnings and removed this Holy Gospel and returned it to Surb Karapet as a memorial to myself and my forefathers.[5]

Regional life did continue, but we observe the focus of survival moving from the center of Turuberan (Taron-Mush) to districts on the periphery such as Khlat, Arjesh, and Artske before again reverting to the center and a return to historical cultural traditions. I do not intend to discuss the colophons studied and published by Khachikyan and Matevosyan concerning renowned philosophers, vardapets, abbots, and teachers. Instead, I shall concentrate directly

---

[3] Khachikyan, *XV dari hishatakaranner*, p. 353.
[4] Ibid., p. 498.
[5] Ibid., p. 89.

on the authors of colophons. The range of colophons written in Turuberan demonstrates the region's exceptional history. During the period of vacillating fortunes, Armenian culture took a backward turn ending in stagnation, as the entire territory was occupied and cut off from other regions of Armenia. Despite the chaos of war, however, local Armenians strove to maintain a semblance of their culture throughout the Middle Ages.

Now when we read colophons we perceive them as waves of information reaching out at us concerning the immediate circumstances of writing. This is the particular characteristic of colophons. At once, they create the potential for exploring the past while also reconstructing the past from the traces the writers have left us. They establish a link between ourselves and the life and thought patterns of an ascetic scribe at work in the spiritual and intellectual ambience of a monastery in Turuberan.

Of the thousands of messages they have sent us through the centuries, I should like to cite a few examples. In 1303, Stepanos Arjeshetsi states: "I wrote . . . in the quarter called Horomvank." Indeed, it is well known that a Chalcedonian Armenian diocese existed at Arjesh with its own monastery and church.[6] In 1316, the scribe Hovhannes from the village of Drnevank in the region of Hark relates: "Locusts have come and destroyed many districts." He left this record so that we could appreciate the effects of the disaster.[7] In 1327, another Hovhannes from the village of Aghet in the region of Bznunik wrote in the margin of a Gospel: "I found a fine accurate exemplar from the hand of Toros the philosopher from Drazark."[8] The scribe Mkrtich Baghishetsi made a copy from the same exemplar in 1443 in which he writes: "I, the priest Mkrtich . . . found a fine accurate exemplar that was written by Toros the philosopher in Drazark for the famous Monastery of the Holy Apostles in Taron . . . which is called Lazarus' monastery."[9] In 1402, a copyist of Taron

---

[6] Khachikyan, *XIV dari hishatakaranner*, p. 20.

[7] Ibid., p. 121.

[8] Ibid., p. 202. The reference is to Toros Roslin. See ibid., p. 695. Roslin himself left a colophon that confirms the above information in his famous Gospel copied at Drazark in 1290 for presentation to the Monastery of Saint John the Precursor (Surb Karapet) in Mush. Ibid., pp. 655-58.

[9] Ibid., p. 545.

complains that foreign oppressors are demanding that Armenians change their religion.[10] In 1438, a scribe of Artske writes the name of the Turkmen Pir Ali Khan in his colophon. The latter had ordered that an Armenian family bring all its children to him, and when he was rebuffed he had their home burned, with the family in it.[11] In the following year, the scribe Herapet restored a manuscript, leaving a note to the effect that it was so worn the folios had become delicate as cotton and had been eaten away by moths to such an extent that he was scarcely able to restore the binding.[12] Our profound thanks are due him for his devotion in prolonging the manuscript's life up to the present. What source would have been available to us to gain this type of information were it not for the diligent efforts of these medieval scribes?

Although we are widely distanced in time and place from the scribes and their artistic work, the legacy of commemorations they have left speaks so clearly down through the centuries that we have the impression of being the direct recipient of their observations on life. We perceive events exactly as the scribe did, and the outline of his thought unites us with the circumstances under investigation and deepens the scope of our understanding. Historically, the scribe fashions a link between us and the information he recounts. The information he conveys is compact; it is universal; it sketches the bigger picture while directing our glance at specific events deserving particular attention. For instance, the colophon of a Gospel-book copied by Mkrtich in 1443 at Baghesh is structured as follows: initial Trinitarian doxology; delineation of time and place; details on himself, the commissioner (in the person of the king), and the church (in the person of the abbot); and his plea, but especially the following:

> Now . . . I wrote [this] at the time when the [relic of the] right hand of [Saint Gregory] the Illuminator was stolen from Sis. Vardapets gathered at Echmiadzin and appointed a Catholicos. And they say that the Illuminator's right hand is with us and the truth

[10] Khachikyan, *XV dari hishatakaranner*, vol. 1, p. 25.
[11] Ibid., pp. 484-85.
[12] Ibid., p. 497.

God only knows.[13]

The following is from a menologium of the same scribe in the same year:

> And they appointed Ter Kirakos called Khlonts as Catholicos, a much sought-after man who resembled the great hierarchs.[14]

The reference is to Catholicos Kirakos Virapetsi, who was born into the Khlonts family of Arjesh. These colophons include two pieces of information of great importance for the Armenian people. As we read we can imagine what a sensation it must have been for the region, for Greater Armenia, and for Cilicia alike. The catholicosal seat had returned to Vagharshapat along with the sacred right hand of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, both of which were of deep significance to believers.

Such an approach by the scribe evokes moments of connection in our memory. He sends us a message through the course of history and our recollection is drawn to Turuberan, Mush, Berkri, Arjesh, Artske, Khlat, Manazkert, and other scattered monasteries. The colophon is a condensed miniature that comprises the dynamic contents of a historical work and the scribe's personal inner spiritual world, which equates the colophon with a collection of letters. Take, for example, a colophon-letter penned by Hovsian in a Gospel-book he copied in 1306 at the village of Berdak:

> I beseech you at the same time to commemorate me, the humble Hovsian, whose spirit is full of iniquitous sins, and my parents, Shirik and Hripsime, for the love of Christ.[15]

We have received his letter. He preserved the past for the future. Since time is unitary, the past of Turuberan (and all Armenia) is the link of continued survival. How could Armenians contemplate their future if that minor figure had not established their foundation?

---

[13] Ibid., p. 545.
[14] Ibid., p. 546. See further, p. xxxiv.
[15] Khachikyan, *XIV dari hishatakaranner*, p. 42.

Another theme that extends like a leitmotif from age to age in colophons is the scribe's aspiration toward perfection. The celebrated Hovhannes Mankasarents of Arjesh, who was born in 1417 and lived to the ripe old age of 86, began his career as a copyist at 14 and produced 132 manuscripts in his 72 years of scribal activity. Some of his manuscripts are on display at the Matenadaran, the Institute of Manuscripts, in Erevan.[16] Grigor Khlatetsi and Tovma Minasents are also noteworthy examples. And a Bishop Sargis, for instance, writes in 1416 to beg indulgence for his poor handwriting:

> Alas, my hand shakes . . . my eyes don't see clearly, it's forty years I've been writing. Grant [me] forgiveness.[17]

Interestingly the scribe Tiratsu Mshetsi from the Monastery of the Nine Springs in a lectionary copied in 1420 reformulates Bishop Sargis' colophon from the previous example as follows:

> I know that there are countless deficiencies in my script. However, though there were many, that is the level of my ability. My hand was shaking and my eye could not see at all, my writing finger had grown stiff, so I wrote with my middle finger.[18]

Here the principle of universalizing the specific applies. Turuberan is the center of our attention not as the historical region with its districts, towns, monasteries, and villages, but as a community. We look for data on what was happening in the life of a local prince, priest, or bishop, or a common man and his relatives. The colophon transmits to us Turuberan's dynamism, its energy. Hence, the same contrast exists between the information provided by scribes and that derived from historical sources as between live conversation and cold, impersonal narrative.

The accepted mode of communication in Japan is minimalist. It is believed that the truth lies beyond the realm of words. Thus one should try to influence one's interlocutor by employing the

---

[16] Khachikyan, *XV dari hishatakaranner*, p. liv.
[17] Ibid., p. 184.
[18] Ibid.

fewest words possible so that an information explosion occurs in that person's mind. One can catch a glimpse of this in the Armenian experience from reading the following line composed by an unknown scribe in Artske: "I wrote . . . beside this sanctifying lake [of Van] where small fish frolic."[19] One need not be from Artske or Van to be moved by this brief passage. Receiving a new fullness from these words, we gain a deeper perspective on Turuberan's tradition and ambience.

In summarizing the scribe's role in Armenian culture, one might conclude that the colophon he has left us is an impulse from olden times. The colophon is the manuscript's pulse—its identity papers. By its use of national symbols it can be identified with Urartian cuneiform tablets, Armenian inscriptions, the beautifully-sculptured stone *khachkars*, and other such codes which transfer drops of information through the centuries, through the cosmos. When these drops unite they become the throbbing of a people's heart. How did Turuberan's heart beat in olden times? The Middle Ages were vibrant when Turuberan was inhabited by its Armenian population, with all its life and bustling activity. Meanwhile, in the dim light of the monastic sanctuaries quietly and modestly the pulse of Turuberan was palpitating, the scribe was writing . . . unaware of who he was:

> I . . . servant of the servants of God, having attained an old age and awaiting my departure from this life, wrote this Holy Book with fervent love as an eternal memorial to us and our forefathers, a testament of life without end, a provision and guide on the way to heaven, at our own expense . . . as a covenant and treasure which cannot be taken away . . . and we presented it with great affection to the heavenly mother of light, the Holy God-Bearer, as a memorial for our souls.[20]

---

[19] Matevosyan, *XIII dar*, p. 22.

[20] Khachikyan, *XV dari hishatakaranner*, p. xxxiv.